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V CORPS COMBAT ENGINEER LEARNING TO COPE WITH BLINDNESS CAUSED BY KARBALA ATTACK

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GIESSEN, Germany – The light went out forever on May 7, 2004, in Karbala, Iraq, for V Corps' Staff Sgt. Jason Pepper. That's the day his M113 personnel carrier was hit by an improvised explosive device while on patrol with Company B, 16th Engineer Battalion.



ALEXANDRA WILLIAMS

Staff Sgt. Jason Pepper of V Corps' Company B, 16th Engineer Battalion, his wife Heather and 2-year-old daughter Naomi are reunited in Giessen, Germany. The Peppers are learning to adjust to Jason's blindness, the result of an injury he received while serving in Iraq.

Besides suffering other injuries, Pepper lost his sight.

"I couldn't speak, but I could hear. I was lying on my team leader -- who was also injured -- and laid on the floor of our M113 personnel carrier," said Pepper. "I couldn't move my body and I thought, 'Oh my God, I am dead,'" he said.

Pepper spent four months in Baghdad and one week in Karbala before his career as a combat engineer was brought to an abrupt end.

The 27-year-old New Jersey native had worked as an emergency medical technician with the Waldwick, N.J., fire department before joining the Army in 1995. He met his wife, Heather, the daughter of a 284th Base Support Battalion employee, in October 1998 after being assigned to the 1st Armored Division's 16th Engineer Battalion here.

"It was love at first sight. In February 1999, we got married," he said.

In September 2000 the couple moved to Fort Riley, Kan., where Jason was assigned to the 1st Engineer Battalion, 1st Infantry Division. Two years later he requested to return to Germany.

"Actually I wanted to go to Schweinfurt, but my former first sergeant recognized my name on the list of the replacement company in Frankfurt and brought me back to Giessen," he said.

In April 2003 the battalion prepared for deployment to support Operation Iraqi Freedom. Medical reasons prevented Pepper from deploying with his unit.

"I am a field Soldier, not a garrison Soldier," he said. "When I first joined the Army I went straight to Bosnia for 11 months. Since that time I deployed five times."

In February he was finally able to follow his buddies. "They blessed off my orders because they needed NCOs downrange," Pepper said.

Then his world changed dramatically on May 7.

"I was in a daze when they evacuated me. My voice would just not come out and I was spitting blood as I was trying to talk," he said. "Everything felt numb. Suddenly my voice kicked in and I felt pain. I asked -- no, I yelled -- for pain medication. I was yelling because everything was muffled and slow motion.

"Then the helicopter came and I passed out. I guess my body just shut down, or maybe it was because of the medication; I don't know. When I woke up I was in Baghdad and my brother, who also deployed to Iraq, was by my side," Pepper said. "I was glad he was with me. Within six hours he was rushed to my bedside. At this point I still didn't know the extent of my injuries."

Countless cuts and bleeding wounds left the doctors speculating about Jason's condition.

"They spoke about amputations and that my face was disfigured so that nobody would recognize me.

Finally the doctors explained to me that my eyeballs were gone. That's when it hit me. I asked myself how I would be able to take care of my family. It was so devastating, there were so many emotions. I felt like a lost dog," he said.

A chaplain helped Jason finally call his wife, Heather.



KARL WEISEL

From left to right: Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, Denise Von Wiecki, Von Wiecki's son-in-law Staff Sgt. Jason Pepper of V Corps' Company B, 16th Engineer Battalion, and Pepper's wife Heather chat during the 1st Armored Division's welcome home ceremony Oct. 7 at the Wiesbaden (Germany) Army Airfield. Pepper was awarded the Bronze Star with Valor and the Purple Heart for his actions while serving with the 1st Armored Division engineer battalion in Iraq.

"I wanted to talk to her and tell her that I was alive," Pepper said. "I wished to be with her, but at the same time I was afraid. I could feel the cuts in my face, I knew my eyes were gone and I was concerned about how I might look. After all they had told me my face was disfigured."

Jason was evacuated to Germany to the medical facilities in Landstuhl where he was reunited with Heather and his 2-year-old daughter Naomi.

"I had to smoke a couple of cigarettes to build up the courage before I went inside the hospital," said Heather. "When they first came to my house at 4 p.m. that day, I thought he was dead. Then I was told that I would not recognize him due to the injuries. They talked about possible blindness and amputations.

"It was overwhelming at times, but I had to keep myself together for our 2-year-old daughter. I basically lived by the phone, and I ended up telling the story about a million times. I was glad that he was alive and in the hospital, but I also asked myself, 'Now what?' I prayed, 'Let it only be one arm they amputate, not both arms,'" Heather said.

To her relief she learned Jason would keep both arms.

"Most upsetting was that most of the community knew about it before I did. The other guys in the company called their wives right after it happened, while casualty [assistance] had to wait for details before they could contact me. It could have happened that a spouse would have told me while I was walking the dog," she said.

A few days later the Peppers were flown to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., so Jason could undergo several surgeries.

Jason returned to Germany with a prosthetic eye in his left eye socket and a marble in his right to keep the socket in shape until a second prosthetic eye becomes available.

The stay at Walter Reed and its Fisher House facility helped the couple prepare for the long recovery still ahead of them, they said. A psychologist helped Jason express his inner turmoil.

"She talked to me and suddenly my emotions started to come out. I told her about my fears, and once

I spoke about it, started to cry. I cried for 45 minutes. It was good to talk to someone else. I always wanted to stay strong for Heather, but now I could let all my fears out. It really helped me, because I was able to accept my blindness. I knew I couldn't change what happened, so I had to take a step forward," Pepper said.

Leaving the relative safety of Walter Reed was hard for him, he said, because there he was able to meet other Soldiers in similar situations.

"I was only the fifth Soldier who returned blind, but it was good to be around others who also had defects. Over here I still feel nervous and scared."

In Germany the Peppers days are filled with daily travel to the Heidelberg Army hospital for therapy. Doctors told Jason the Army will not discharge him until he is self-sufficient, he said, which could take up to two years.

"I cannot cook or pour a drink. It used to be normal to cook macaroni and cheese, but now I am afraid of the stove. Am I using the right pot? How about the water? There are still too many things I am concerned about, and it'll take a while. What can I do if someone breaks in when I am alone? Hand therapy is also a big deal for me. For the past five to six months the most trivial things seem very big to me," said Jason.

"I used to love watching movies, but that's no longer fun. I am often bored because there is nothing I can do on my own. I thought I could learn Braille, to be at least able to read, but it's very difficult to learn and takes a long time. It shattered my whole dream when I learned there is no trick to learning it," he said.

Pepper said he often feels like a burden for Heather. "It's harder for Heather than it is for me," he said. "She's a cook, maid, physical therapist, mother and wife. Actually she's a single mother with two children, and she does not have the option of being sick or not feeling well."

Serving as Jason's eyes, Heather carries the burden of helping him protect himself, he said.

Forgetting to mention a step when they walk together could result in more injuries. Personal interactions have also changed.

"Many people are insecure when they see me, but I don't want them to feel strange just because I cannot see. They should treat me as a normal person," said Pepper.

"You should see how the two German shepherd dogs that belong to my mother-in-law play games with me.

Sometimes when I am trying to pick up their toy, they sneak up on me and push it out of reach. I can just feel them watching me. It's almost as if they are laughing at me. Naomi starts to do the same.

She moves stuff out of my reach and watches me look for it. She often helps me by saying left or right when I am reaching for something. The dogs and my daughter don't seem to have a problem with me being blind and they don't pity me. They encourage me to use my other senses and to adjust, and I want other people to do the same when they talk to me," he said.

The most painful experience for Jason is how the relationship with his parents has changed.

"One day Heather was surfing the net and typed my name in. She found a story on me that my parents must have done with my hometown newspaper after visiting me in the hospital," he said.

During the visit Jason told his parents that he does not wish to have his photo taken or tell his story to a newspaper.

"Now there was a photo of me in the paper and a story that was not even true," he said.

Apparently his parents also organized several fundraisers.

"We've heard that my hometown has organized a Harley bike run and donated the money to a stateside fund in my name, but we don't know where the money is going to. I only know that we did not receive it," Jason said.

Attempts to clarify this with his parents were unsuccessful. "They refuse to talk to me or Heather.

The only person I am still close to in my family is my brother," he said.

Despite the challenges the couple is facing, they have not given up.

"I will work again one day. I am in the job placement program of the Wounded Warrior Foundation. And

I will build memories with my daughter Naomi," said Pepper, who will remain in Germany with his family. "She should not have to suffer because her daddy is blind.

"Nobody knows what the future holds. ... I was a Boy Scout as a little boy, and we helped blind people. Back then I never thought I would be 27 and blind. I hope technology will advance and one day they can give me back my vision. I have everything that is needed, I just need something that replaces my eyeballs.

"It only takes a second to get injured, but a lifetime to get better," Jason said.

(Editor's note: The Giessen Community Bank has established a Jason Pepper Fund.

Those who wish to support the Peppers may make donations to the fund.)

